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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

What exactly makes a successful instructional leader? According to Hilliard (2000), a successful instructional leader is one who works at, "earning and sustaining trust, listening actively, mastering timing, conveying a sense of sincere caring, formulating ideas clearly and succinctly, transmitting sympathy and empathy as needed" (p.157). Simple possession of these qualities however, does not predetermine success. To be successful the instructional leader must combine personal beliefs with these qualities to promote advancement in the school and the community.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Christopher J. Hoover

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Introduction

Throughout my short, nine year, educational experience I have known several administrators personally and professionally. Knowing these people has given me a better understanding of what it takes to be a successful instructional leader. What exactly makes a successful instructional leader? According to Hilliard (2000), a successful instructional leader is one who works at, “earning and sustaining trust, listening actively, mastering timing, conveying a sense of sincere caring, formulating ideas clearly and succinctly, transmitting sympathy and empathy as needed” (p.157). Simple possession of these qualities however, does not predetermine success. To be successful the instructional leader must combine personal beliefs with these qualities to promote advancement in the school and the community.

Personal Beliefs

Personal beliefs in education are not all the same. My beliefs have developed through experiences, interactions, and observations. The importance that educational leaders possess philosophical beliefs is accentuated by Barnett (1991),

“Many with an interest in educational administration believe it is very important for administrators to understand and develop belief systems and philosophies for their practice. Administrators have a knowledge base, a way of thinking about things, that needs to be understood” (p.87).

When stakeholders gain insight and understanding to an instructional leader's way of thinking, decisions made by the leader are more easily accepted. This acceptance of beliefs is what allows change within the organization to take place.

Four personal beliefs that I possess about the realm of education are:

- A) Environment affects human development.
- B) All students are capable of learning.
- C) Schooling correlates directly to adult life.
- D) School should be a safe haven for students and teachers.

The first belief focuses on how the environment inside, and outside, the school plays a major role in human development. A positive environment nurtures the growth of an individual both mentally and physically. Growth is necessary for success in school. If a child's home is a place of abuse, anguish, or negativity learning will be adversely affected. This is stressed in Marcia D'Arcangelo's (2000) interview with scientist Andrew Meltzoff.

“Being in a deprived environment is devastating to a child's development. In tragic cases where a child has been locked in a closet or isolated from human interaction for years, the child has not developed normally. If a severely isolated child is found after he has grown to puberty, you cannot teach the child language and his or her social development will absolutely never be normal” (p.12).

Therefore, when a student's home environment does not meet these growth needs, it is imperative that the school provides such an environment.

The environment within the school also contributes to a child's learning. Brain research suggests “very young children, and probably all of us, learn better in stress-free

environments. Teachers should create non-threatening classrooms that foster exploration and discovery so that children can test their cognitive and emotional limits (D'Arcangelo, 2000, p.11). Children in the classroom should feel that they are safe. They should be able to take academic risks and challenge themselves without fear of scrutiny.

The second belief addresses the nature of learning. Regardless of mental and physical capabilities, all children can learn. For some kids learning must take place in slower, unique ways. This may include a variety of multisensory stimulation such as auditory, visual, and tactile. It is the responsibility of the educational leader to ensure that these children's needs are being met by the teachers.

Meeting the needs of children can be done through a well-organized teacher evaluation program. This program should have teachers working with one another to set personal and professional goals. These goals should be measurable and align with the mission of the school. When goals have been met new ones should be made. The majority of the responsibility of this program should be on the shoulders of the teachers. Then, it is the instructional leaders responsibility to evaluate and intervene when necessary.

The third belief correlates schooling and adult life. Students need to learn tasks and responsibilities that will not only carry them through the work world, but also make them productive members of the community. The task of the school is to provide such learning possibilities through a variety of techniques. One of these teaching techniques should be activity. Activity in learning is very important. As D'Arcangelo (2000) points out, "children don't learn well from having information passively presented to them. School aged children like concrete manipulation and active, meaningful exploration

(p.11). Getting children actively engaged ensures more learning will take place. When the students can see, hear, feel, taste, or touch what they are trying to learn, connections will be obtained. Through these connections students will remember more.

The fourth belief emphasizes the need for schools to be safe places for students and teachers. School violence is widespread and now affects communities of all sizes and students of all ages. The General Accounting Office (1997) estimated that one in five high school students regularly carried a weapon in school. The 1999 Annual Report on School Safety (USDOE 1999a) indicated that the rate of multiple victim homicides at schools increased from two events per year in 1992-93 to five events in 1997-98. All fifty states reported they had expelled an estimated 3,930 students in 1997-98 for bringing firearms to school. About seven percent of students in grades nine through twelve reported being threatened or injured with a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property (USDOE, 1999b). With statistics like these it is hard to ignore the need for a safe learning environment.

When the environment is one of safety students and teachers are more at ease. A school is considered safe, according to Short and Greer (2002) when, “not only are there are no external threats, but also when there are no internal threats” (p.35). This statement reflects the need for a safe environment outside the classroom as well as inside. The lack of threat provides a sense of relaxation and creates a school climate that is conducive to learning and teaching.

Many steps can be taken to ensure a safe school. The most obvious is having a well- structured discipline and behavior modification system. This system should be consistent with the school vision and mission. The plan should be easy to understand and

social, political, economic, and educational upheavals we have ever known, and this turmoil endangers virtually all institutions and their leaders. Education, broadly defined as from kindergarten through graduate school, is seen as America's solution. Whatever the problem, educational institutions are viewed by many as the nation's first line of defense. Today, education leaders find themselves leading organizations and groups across a rapidly shifting landscape toward new destinations- often under provocative conditions. These groups are increasingly diverse and challenged to deal with undefined problems, grapple with theoretical and emotional issues, and make decisions so new that the organizational consequences are unknown. Education leaders must help individuals and groups make sense and increased meaning in often fragmented, overwhelming, and fast-moving situations characteristic of the new millennium (p.24-25).

As administrators work toward achieving a self sufficient, well run school, they will often need to rely on the leadership qualities they possess. The qualities that I believe an effective instructional leader should possess are: (a) effective communicator, (b) consistent, (c) compassionate, (d) trustworthy, (e) leader by example, (f) highly visible.

The first quality an instructional leader should possess is being an effective communicator. There are few skills more pervasively needed for being an educational leader than exceptional communication skills. Hilliard (2000) explains that superb communication skills entail several aspects.

Communication, of course, is far more than choosing the right words or forming grammatical sentences. Communication involves making a meaningful connection with one or more other people for the exchange of ideas, information, feelings, or influence. Optimal communication is a reflection of what people know, how they think, how internally comfortable they are, what skills they have and, in a word, who they are. Full communication involves earning and sustaining trust, listening actively, mastering timing, conveying a sense of sincere caring, formulating ideas clearly and succinctly, transmitting sympathy or empathy as needed, and much more (p.157).

As Hilliard suggests, communication is much more than talking. It is also more than sending a progress report home once a month. Outstanding instructional leaders will go out of their way to let parents know how their child is doing. Just as important, they will communicate to parents what is expected from their student. This can be accomplished through means such as summer orientation, open house, parent-teacher meetings, and monthly public meetings. Strong educational leaders will go above and beyond minimal expectations to keep stakeholders informed.

Other aspects of communication are social attractiveness and credibility. These two aspects can have a profound effect on audiences. According to Cooper and Croyle (1984) “the general conditions for communicators (anyone who sends a message) to inspire their audiences (anyone who receives a message) have shown that two general attributes, credibility and social attractiveness, are potent and persuasive elements of influence.” When the instructional leader is seen as credible and socially attractive

changes can be made. These changes occur through the influence that the leader has over the audience.

Social attractiveness and credibility influence audiences in two ways, both of which may be important to school leadership. First, audiences use a communicator's credibility and social attractiveness as a heuristic to establish the validity of persuasive messages. Second, a communicator's credibility and social attractiveness enhance innovation by minimizing opposition to discrepant viewpoints between the change agent and the audience (Chaiken and Stangor, 1987, p.2).

Being an effective communicator can sway an audience. The power of persuasion allows changes to occur within the school structure. These changes will enhance the learning environment for students and teachers alike.

Another key ingredient of being an effective communicator is including all stakeholders. With all stakeholders involved, this insures that the school vision and mission is known and understood. Barbara Clark, principal at St. Marks Lutheran School in California, states,

I spend many, many hours both on and off campus researching and working with the staff, pastors and school board, developing programs and techniques to enable the staff, students and parents to have a clear understanding of the school's mission (ECLA News Service, July 18, 2001, p.1).

People that are aware of the school vision can begin to work together with common goals in mind. Achieving these goals by consistently involving the community, teachers, and parents is the leader's ultimate objective.

The second quality that an instructional leader should possess is consistency.

Consistency should be maintained with rules, regulations, punishments, and consequences. Consistency helps students and staff understand what is, and what is not, expected of them. When expectations are known, problems are less likely to occur. When problems arise punishments will be perceived as fair.

Without consistency the instructional leaders create an atmosphere of unjust and unruliness. Behavior problems will arise more often and punishments will not be taken seriously. Eventually, students and staff begin to see the system as a big joke. This causes kids to try and take advantage of situations further. With turmoil in the classroom staff will lose confidence in the principal's ability to lead effectively. The school then begins a downward spiral into chaos.

The third quality that an educational leader should possess is compassion. Students feel comfortable and safe in an atmosphere that shows and teaches compassion. The Dictionary of the Spanish Language defines compassion as “the feeling of commiseration and pity that one has towards those who suffer hardships or misfortune”. In other words, compassion can be described as a feeling that one has for those people who are less fortunate than him/her self. Arteta (1996) provides further insight on how compassion may be described:

1. Compassion is founded on the dignity and limitations of man. It is only because man has dignity that he is capable of compassion. Without compassion, nobody would feel pity for him and he would not feel pity for others. Only if the dignity of others is recognized and respected can misery, suffering and oppression be considered as an offence towards man and engender our compassion.

2. Compassion has a name. Only individuals suffer, with a grief that is far from abstraction. There is no such thing as compassion for Humanity, only for the humanity of each individual. Collective wrongs are expressed in the shape of personally felt sufferings.

3. Compassion is universal; it is for and with everybody and must be given unconditionally. The compassionate person sees every man as his neighbour. A man only has to show that he is in need to claim, in all dignity, the right to compassion.

4. ...compassion, for us, can be understood as help, commitment and protest. It is founded on the recognition of the responsibility that we feel towards all human beings

5. Compassion in an educational leader is the root of their humanity (p. 57).

Compassion allows stakeholders to see the true side of the instructional leader. A side that few stakeholders rarely witness.

Compassion is important when trying to make connections with children. The importance is compounded when dealing with children in need. According to Knapp, Turnbaull, and Shields (1990),

more than one in five children in the United States come from families of poverty. Many of these children perform poorly on academic tasks, have behavioral problems, and low proficiency in English. Thus, some students are doubly disadvantaged: first because their patterns of behavior, language use, and values do not match those required in the school setting; second, because teachers

and administrators fail to adapt to and take advantage of the strengths that these students do possess (p.5).

Leaders with compassion realize that these children have fewer out-of-school opportunities than their more advantaged counterparts. This leads to certain characteristics being displayed in school by these children. Characteristics such as the ones that Payne (1998) points out: “disorganized, incomplete homework, talking back, and disliking authority (p.2). Therefore, because of these characteristics, a need exists to help these children find meaning in what they are doing at school. A principal can help them do this. “By getting closer to their constituents and by letting their constituents get to know them, leaders can strengthen their foundation of credibility” (Posner, 1993; Rahim, 1989. p.545-556). As children in need perceive the principal as a credible adult, a bond will develop. A bond that in the long run, will work to the educational leaders advantage.

If educational leaders do not display compassion they portray an image of being cold and heartless. This causes staff and community members to view the administrator as unapproachable. If stakeholders view the leader as unapproachable communication will suffer. Thus, without communication, vision is lost, goals are left unaccomplished, and problems arise.

The fourth quality that an educational leader should command is trustworthiness. There are several state of affairs that demand trust. The most obvious would be the depth and adequacy of knowledge possessed by the leader. As Stephen Covey (1994) says, “trustworthiness is a function of character and competence. Character is what we are;

competence is what we can do. Both are necessary to create trustworthiness” (p.241). As an instructional leader, stakeholders should expect that the principal would have a clear understanding of education and use their knowledge base in a proficient manner. Therefore, a manner of trustworthiness lends to the effectiveness of the entire staff through unique instructional, communicational, and behavioral models by the instructional leader.

As the staff’s trust in the leader grows, so grows the credibility of the leader. According to Martin (1978), trustworthiness is a “component of credibility” (p.1). When an instructional leader is credible, audiences can be influenced. “Audiences use a communicator’s credibility as a heuristic to establish the validity of persuasive messages” (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987, p.2). A communicator’s credibility also “enhances innovation by minimizing opposition to discrepant viewpoints...” (Strong & Claiborn, 1982). Thus, the general principles of being trustworthy have huge implications for instructional leaders as they attempt to modify staff roles and responsibilities.

Trustworthiness also allows the educational leader to accomplish multiple tasks within the school. This is accomplished through teacher empowerment.

Teacher empowerment is not a simple process, nor is it one that can be accomplished overnight. Empowerment, as Short and Greer (2002) state, “requires that principals, teachers, staff members, and parents all have mature judgment and the desire to make the school a learning place for all students” (p.14).

The key to empowerment is for all who are involved in the school setting to have the desire to want control of the environment. Desire would mean that these people would

have to fully participate in the processes that are needed to make the school a better place. As Black and English (1986) talk about empowerment they mention how, participatory democracy requires participation. It's so much easier for some teachers to let administrators make all the decisions and do all the work and then bitch about the outcome and complain that they weren't consulted in the decision... participatory democracy takes the wind out of the sails of the critics and the windbags (p.160).

With an empowered staff, instructional leaders ensure that most minor changes and problems that occur can be taken care of without jumping head first into it themselves. This allows the principal to indulge in the "top priority" activities further enhancing the school and community. Without improvement and change the school and community become stagnant. Stakeholders would be forced to stay with, or revert to, the "old ways." To keep stakeholders from turning to the ways of old, instructional leaders need to lead by way of example.

The fifth quality of an educational leader is to lead by example. There is no easier way to convey philosophies and beliefs than through actions. Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) claim that, "overall success in administration depends on one's overall leadership ability" (p.153). Leadership ability is portrayed through actions. Through actions people believe what you say, and, more importantly, know that you mean what you say. Cuglewski (1997) also deems that, "setting an example every day is the best way for the boss to show employees how to treat customers, suppliers, one another, and, by extension, the company" (p.16). Principals that lead by example are showing teachers, students, and the community how they expect situations to be handled. They also display

how they expect people to treat one another. “I’ve got to be the leader and create the atmosphere,” states Cuglewski (1997). “I don’t have to tell employees to be honest, fair, and how to treat people because we work so closely it is reflected in conversation and through actions” (p.16). When an atmosphere such as this is created it saves time on future problems that would have arose had this climate not been created.

Should principals not lead by example they set themselves up to be scrutinized. They also run the risk of being portrayed as a hypocrite. This could then cause stakeholders to always look for inconsistencies between the administrator’s words and actions. When stakeholders start to do this, feelings of untrustworthiness can begin to surface. Leading by example for a principal, therefore, is of utmost importance.

The sixth quality of an effective leader is high visibility. Principal visibility is the key to quality leadership. In order to be visible a principal must work outside the confines of the office. However, as Schwack (2000) explains this can be difficult.

Telephone calls, budgetary matters, and discipline are some of the management tasks that chain principals to their desks. As they become enslaved by the work that piles up in their offices, leadership begins to take a secondary position to their management imperative (p.1).

Visibility ensures that the staff, students, and the community realize that the instructional leader is taking a vested interest in the school. A management technique that can be used to show this is called Management By Wandering Around.

Management by Wandering Around (MBWA) leaders are seldom found in their offices during school hours. They spend time in classrooms and hallways, with teachers and students. This is the most crucial underlying value of MBWA: the

commitment to be with people, and the belief that the classroom and the teachers and students are the source of diagnostic information and solutions to problems (Frase and Milton, 1992, p.17).

This technique accomplishes two objectives. First, MBWA gives stakeholders a sense of comfort knowing that the principal is around. Staff can feel at ease knowing that if there is a problem, the principal is not far away, making the principal's presence seem ordinary and expected. Secondly, MBWA serves as a deterrent to negative actions. Considering that the majority of a principal's time is consumed by discipline problems, a principal who is visible at student arrival times, during lunch, and during passing times can have a positive impact on student behavior.

Visibility also enhances communication. When principals are visible they are easily accessible which allows communication to take place. Fiore (2000) claims that, when principals mistakenly regard office management tasks as a top priority, this causes principals to spend inordinate amounts of time in their offices. The result can be the creation of a negative school culture in which principals fit the descriptions to which many of us have grown accustomed. In contrast, educational leaders of schools with positive climates were highly visible to stakeholders throughout the school day (p.2).

Positive school climates are extremely important to learning. As Freiberg (1996) states "a healthy school climate contributes to effective teaching and learning" (p.22). In part, a principal who wanders around can either make or break a school climate. Therefore, effective school leadership simply cannot be accomplished from the confines of the office. The instructional leader must prioritize, putting kids first and paperwork second.

What kind of work could be more satisfying, and have a bigger impact on children, than being an educational leader? The opportunities to touch a child's life in this occupation are innumerable. To know that every day I can make a difference is a gratification that no one can take away. The United States Senate adds that,

in many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school.... It is his leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of the teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become (p.305).

I agree whole-heartedly with this statement. The instructional leader is the lone individual that can make or break a school. The types of relationships an instructional leader indulges in will set the tone for the building. Just as Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) confirm, "School management in this century is becoming a management of relationships. The relationship of child to learning, child to child, child to adult, adult to adult, and the school to the community (p.142). In order for these relationships to emerge and grow, principals must employ their best management techniques. These techniques according to Moyers (2000) are:

- (a) Always do what you say you are going to do.
- (b) Take time to be with people at every level of the organization
- (c) Have clear understanding with everyone as to what his or her objectives are.
- (d) Spend time with [people outside the organization] and listen to them.
- (e) Take care of the employees who report to you.

These techniques are essential to the success of an instructional leader.

Leaders doing what they say they are going to is a key component in the consistency aspect of leadership. This lets everyone within the organization know what to expect in every situation. Consistency, in turn, lends to a smooth operating business.

Taking time to visit with people is an integral part of caring and compassion. When administrators show that they care for people, the people will do the same. This will build a solid foundation for strong and lasting relationships.

Spending time with people outside the place of employment is also important. This allows the administrator and teachers to get to know the personal side of one another. If this did not happen people would treat each other as if they were at work all the time. This in turn, would not build meaningful relationships.

Finally, taking care of those who report to you is by far the most important technique for instructional leaders. When an administrator does this they are adding to that foundation of relationship. The more trust and caring that can be put into the relationship, the better the work environment will be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for a school to be successful it needs an efficient leader. The leader must motivate people to take part in activities that they otherwise would not engage in. They must be caring, compassionate, and readily available to all stakeholders. Instructional leaders must make some easy, as well as very difficult decisions. Most of all, the instructional leader must have a vested interest in the children

of the school. English and Black (1986) passionately portray the impact that an administrator has on the lives of children when they say,

It takes a lot to be a good administrator. It takes even more to survive. Touching kids' lives in ways few classroom teachers can without having to use "subject matter" as a vehicle or having to "cover curriculum" and having the potential of touching more of them than any classroom teacher can hope to touch make the job worth the struggle for survival because it's their survival you're struggling for as well, not just yours. And who else has more time and authority to tell kids "from the first day" that they could grow? And who else can let them -all of them- get close to a person who has his office with his name on the door? Having a hand in development of humanity is God's work, and there will be times when you'll swear that you can feel His warm breath against the back of your neck. And you'll come to know exactly what John F. Kennedy meant when he said, "Here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own" (p.105).

The previous paragraph sums up why society has placed such rigorous standards on school administrators. These leaders are lending a hand in the development of humanity by shaping the youthful minds of the future. Anyone that has that much power should be held accountable for these children. Therefore, the desire to become the best instructional leader possible needs to be the goal for all current, and future, school administrators.

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